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ABSTRACT

If a student is to develop reading comprehension, he must possess and activate a number of linguistic and cognitive skills. He comes to the text with certain expectations and uses a cyclical process of sampling, predicting, testing, and confirming to understand it. The overall goal of reading instruction is to produce motivated, independent, fluent, and efficient readers. Researchers and teachers have devised a number of teaching strategies and exercises to promote good reading skills and lead to reading comprehension. They have particularly emphasized the strategy of contextual guessing using typographical, pictorial, syntactic, and semantic clues. Not all students are equally successful at learning new words, but use a variety of strategies based on individual preferences and learning styles. Research strongly suggests that knowledge of vocabulary and reading comprehension are positively correlated and that the systematic development of word identification skills will improve reading. However, fluent reading will only be accomplished through adequate, continuous practice. Foreign language teachers need to establish reading goals for their programs and follow a consistent plan including intensive and extensive reading from early in the instructional process. (MSE)

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Knowledge of Vocabulary and Reading Comprehension: An Important Relationship

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Abstract

The importance of vocabulary knowledge in foreign language reading comprehension has been recognized by researchers and teachers. Strategies for teaching reading comprehension must be based on an understanding of the dynamics of the reading process. This paper briefly outlines currently popular theoretical assumptions about reading and presents suggestions on how to further reading comprehension through the systematic development of word identification skills.

In recent years, researchers and teachers have begun to pay increased attention to the development of reading skills in foreign language instruction.[1] This new mood is very much in opposition to the assumptions and practices of the audio-lingual era of the 50's and 60's when language was considered to be primarily oral, and reading ability was thought to develop more or less automatically after the oral skills had been mastered. Yet "fluent reading . . . has seldom been a product of the audio-lingual method."[2] Today a more balanced approach is becoming popular. The ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines call for the attainment of measurable levels of proficiency in all four language skills and culture.[3] They illustrate that it is probably not justified to assign priority to any one of them or to teach them sequentially. It appears instead that all skills should be appropriately developed from early on in the instructional process. Byrnes states that there is "considerable debate about degrees and mechanisms of cross-fertilization among them," that the receptive skills play a vital role in the development of the productive skills, and that classroom experience and the acquisition of language by children suggest that "comprehension precedes production."[4]

The following discussion will focus on the development of reading skills and the important role that vocabulary plays in reading comprehension. The limited scope of the paper will not permit any detailed descriptions of teaching strategies or the inclusion of exercises that promote word identification skills.

If reading comprehension is to take place, the reader must possess and activate a number of skills. Phillips vividly illustrates this point by introducing her discussion on "Practical Applications of Recent Research in Reading" with an excerpt from Anthony Burgess' A Clockwork Orange, a novel that contains numerous expressions of Slavic and German origin with which many native English speakers are not familiar.[5] Phillips thus places her readers in a position similar to that of language learners with limited linguistic skills who try to understand a text. Linguistic clues and guessing strategies have to be employed in order to comprehend the excerpt. Phillips maintains that comprehension of the passage requires linguistic knowledge, cognitive skill, and general knowledge of the world. Accordingly, reading comprehension is a highly individual process depending upon innate and acquired learner characteristics. Phillips' assumptions are based upon the insights of psycholinguists such as Goodman and Smith whose investigations into native language learning have largely determined the direction of current research and practices in the teaching of English and foreign languages. In simple terms, reading may be defined as "reconstructing the meaning of the writer, . . . processing the semantic content."[6] Reading is not considered to be a linear process by which letters are combined into words and words into sentences in order to produce meaning. Goodman maintains that the reading process starts with the "graphic display as input, and . . . ends with meaning as output," but that the efficient language user relies on the fewest cues necessary to obtain meaning.[7]

The reader comes to the text with certain expectations. He then employs a cyclical process of sampling, predicting, testing and confirming. In sampling, he relies

> on the redundancy of language and his knowledge of the linguistic constraints. He predicts structures, tests them against the semantic context which he builds up from the situation and the ongoing discourse, and then confirms or disconfirms as he processes further language.[8]

According to Smith, "reading is not primarily visual," and "only a small part of the information necessary for reading comprehension comes from the printed page."[9] Most of the information is already stored behind the eyes.

The primary purposes of reading are to obtain information and to derive pleasure from the printed word. In the beginning stages of foreign language instruction, however, readings are frequently used to teach language, to illustrate structural forms and vocabulary in context. Reading for comprehension follows at a higher level.

The overall goal of reading instruction in the mother-tongue as well as in foreign languages is to produce motivated, independent, fluent and efficient readers. Successful readers have at their disposal a variety of strategies which they employ selectively in order to meet different needs. Woytak identifies these strategies as scanning,

skimming, reading for thorough comprehension, and critical reading.[10] Scanning and skimming involve rapid reading. When scanning, the reader has a specific question in mind and looks rapidly for an appropriate answer, disregarding all unnecessary information. Skimming aims at quickly getting the gist of a passage, perhaps identifying the main idea. Reading for thorough comprehension and critical reading require a close look at the text and a thorough understanding of the message of the writer. Critical reading goes still further. It involves a critical examination of the text, drawing conclusions, and making judgments.[11]

Gaskill makes a distinction between intensive and extensive reading.[12] Each has a different purpose and makes use of different skills. Extensive reading is usually done outside of class and consists of longer and easier selections. It involves rapid reading to get the main idea or a general picture. It is intended to develop fluent reading, to build self-confidence and to provide enjoyment. Intensive reading, on the other hand, is often done in class. It consists of shorter, more difficult passages which require the students to solve problems. It is "reading for exact information . . . and implied meaning, summarizing, and 'projective' reading."[13]

Guided by psycholinguistic principles, researchers and teachers have devised a number of teaching strategies and numerous exercises which are intended to promote good reading skills and lead to reading comprehension. The global approach of contextual guessing has been

particularly emphasized. It is the strategy used by native and advanced foreign language readers to extract meaning from a text. In the process of contextual guessing, the reader uses textual clues and extratextual knowledge. He exploits the lexical, structural and discourse features of the text as well as his knowledge of the subject matter and his general knowledge of the world.[14]

A number of studies in English as a Foreign Language indicate, however, that even after several years of language instruction students were not able to successfully take advantage of contextual clues.[15] Linguistic deficiencies stood in the way of reading comprehension. Coady claims that success in reading another language is directly related to the degree of proficiency in that language.[16] Laufer and Sims concluded from their research on the threshold of L_2 reading competence that "the most important element for interpretation was the vocabulary, then the knowledge of the subject matter, and then discourse markers and syntactic structure."[17] Pearson and Johnson write that also in the native language "the key element to reading comprehension is word knowledge."[18]

Bensoussan and Laufer recommend explicit teaching of vocabulary and systematic training in guessing strategies.[19] Their research revealed two obstacles to reading comprehension: the language learners' wrong preconceived notions about the meaning of certain words and their inability to guess unknown words from context.

Johnson and Pearson designed a comprehensive plan for teaching vocabulary to native English speakers.[20] With some modifications their strategies may also be applied to foreign language teaching. Three broad categories of vocabulary instruction are identified: (1) direct instruction, (2) instruction in generalizable, transferrable skills and habits, and (3) instruction in vocabulary reference materials. Direct instruction of vocabulary includes the recognition of sight words and of meaning vocabulary. Sight words are highly frequent and useful words, also called function words, such as articles, pronouns, auxiliaries, conjunctions and prepositions. They hold the text together and should be recognized instantly in fluent reading. The meaning or content words are nouns, verbs, adjectives and adverbs. They comprise the largest part of the lexicon, and it is impossible to even consider teaching most of them directly. In the course of several years of systematic language instruction, however, a large number of content words may be taught. They should be words of high frequency and usefulness, and of great relevance to the language learners' goals.

Johnson and Pearson maintain that human beings organize reality into concepts, into "generalized classes of meaning."[21] Words are physical symbols of concepts, units of meaning, the meanings being "associated with the surface forms of words as they occur in speech or print."[22] Concepts are acquired through experiences, and the meaning of words in a language represent the experiences shared by a speech

community. Stevick, interested in how human beings acquire, store, recall, and expand concepts, states that a word is an experience which, whenever encountered, brings back "whole images of which it has been a part in the past."[23] Words that are well-known produce clear images and in combination, they contribute to the interpretation of each other and give meaning to sentences and larger units of text.

As language learners enlarge their vocabulary, they will be inreasingly able to make use of structural and contextual clues to identify the meaning of unknown words. Johnson and Pearson call these analytical word identification strategies "generalizable, transferrable skills and habits."[24] They include phonic and structural analysis and contextual analysis. Whereas phonic analysis may be of minimal benefit in foreign language reading, structural analysis is a significant skill through which the learner may be able to determine the meaning of a new word by examining its useful parts. These useful parts, the smallest units of meaning, the morphemes, are the roots, prefixes and suffixes. Structural analysis is thought to be most successful when applied in conjunction with contextual clues.

Contextual analysis is a mind set or habit, "an entire approach to reading."[25] It is educated guessing exploiting the redundancy of language. By examing the context of unfamiliar words, skilled readers try to identify the meanings of new words or new meanings of already known words. Four types of contextual clues may be listed: typographical,

pictorial and graphic, syntactic and semantic. Typographical clues are quotation marks, parentheses and footnotes. Pictorial and graphic clues are found in pictures, charts, graphs, diagrams and maps. Syntactic clues, although generally not able to provide direct definitions of new words, reveal something about an item's class and function through its position in the sentence. Semantic clues, the most frequently used clues in contextual guessing, generally include: direct definitions, explanations, descriptions and examples; restatements; substitute words, such as synonyms or antonyms; figures of speech such as similes or metaphors; summary statements; inferences; subjective clues such as the reflection of tone or mood; and familiar expressions in which a known word has been replaced by an unknown term.[26]

SKilled, efficient readers employ various word identification stragegies concurrently and, if all else fails, they seek recourse to the dictionary. Language learners should be made aware that they do not need to know every single word in order to understand the meaning of a text. If they look up too many words, the text is perhaps too difficult or guessing strategies are inadequate. When readers make frequent stops to check on the meanings of words, they will lose sight of the context. Readings should be well prepared through prereading activities involving practice in vocabulary and structure and familiarization with the content. Readings should be appropriate to the linguistic level of the readers and reflect their interests and needs.

Monolingual dictionaries are generally preferred to bilingual dictionaries because the latter may be misleading. Many students, on the other hand, seem to feel more comfortable with bilingual dictionaries where they can find native language equivalents. Bilingual dictionaries may be acceptable if they provide sufficient examples of the semantic range of words.

Not all students are equally successful at learning new words. They use a variety of strategies based on individual preferences and learning styles. Some appear to expand their vocabulary through reading and listening, while others memorize word lists. Little research appears to have been done on how learners actually acquire new words, what conscious strategies they employ. Hatch maintains that vocabulary acquisition may become one of the most researched areas of foreign language learning and that this "research may follow that of psycholinguists who are now devising ways to test the adequacy of linguistic grammars that are lexically driven."[27]

Research strongly suggests that knowledge of vocabulary and reading comprehension are positively correlated and that the systematic development of word identification skills will improve reading. Yet ultimately, fluent reading will only be accomplished through adequate, continuous practice. Foreign language teachers need to establish reading goals for their programs and follow a consistent plan that includes intensive and extensive reading from early on in the instructional process.

Notes

[1] The September 1984 issue of Foreign Language Annals, [henceforth FLA] was devoted exclusively to the receptive skills: Foreign Language Annals, 17 (1984). Byrnes contributed a very thorough and informative chapter on the receptive skills in the latest Northeast Conference Report: Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Proficiency, Curriculum, Articulation: The Ties that Bind (Middlebury, Vermont: Northeast Conference, 1985), [henceforth PCA].

[2] Muriel Saville-Troike, "Reading and the Audio-Lingual Method," in Reading in a Second Language, ed. Ronald Mackay et al. (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1979), pp. 24-35, [henceforth RSL].

[3] Northeast Conference on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, PCA, p. 9.

[4] Heidi Byrnes, "Teaching Toward Proficiency," in PCA, p. 78.

[5] June K. Phillips, "Practical Implications of Recent Research in Reading," FLA, 17 (1984), 285.

[6] Saville-Troike, p. 24.

[7] Kenneth Goodman, "Psycholinguistic Universals in the Reading Process," in Psycholinguistics and Reading, ed. Frank Smith (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1973), p. 23.

[8] Goodman, p. 23.

[9] Frank Smith, "Psycholinguistics and Reading," in Psycholinguistics and Reading, p. 8.

[10] Lydia Woytak, "Reading Proficiency and a Psycholinguistic Approach to Second Language Reading," FLA, 17 (1984), 510.

[11] Mark A. Clarke and Sandra Silberstein, "Toward a Realization of Psycholinguistic Principles in the ESL Class," in RSL, p. 51.

[12] William H. Gaskill, "The Teaching of Intermediate Reading in the ESL Classroom," in Teaching English as a Second Language, ed. Marianne Celce-Maria and Lois McIntosh (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1979), p. 150.

[13] John Munby, "Teaching Intensive Reading Skills," in RSL, p. 144.

[14] Batia Laufer and Donald Sim, "Measuring and Explaining the Reading Threshold Needed for English for Academic Purpose Texts," FLA, 18 (1985), 7.

[15] Bensoussan, Laufer and Sim conducted a number of studies on contextual guessing with Israeli students who were learning English: Marsha Bensoussan and Batia Laufer, "Lexical Guessing in Context in EFL Reading Comprehension," Journal of Research in Reading, 7, No. 5 (1984), 15-32; and Donald Sim and Marsha Bensoussan, "Control of Contextualized Function and Content Words as It Affects Reading Comprehension Test Scores," in RSL, pp. 36-44.

[16] James Coady, "A Psycholinguistic Model of the ESL Reader," in RSL, p. 9.

[17] Laufer, p. 410.

[18] Dale Johnson and P. David Pearson, Teaching Reading Vocabulary (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p. 178.

[19] Bensoussan and Laufer, p. 27.

[20] Johnson and Pearson, p. 2.

[21] Johnson and Pearson, p. 33.

[22] Johnson and Pearson, p. 34.

[23] Earl W. Stevick, Teaching and Learning Languages, (London: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 45.

[24] Johnson and Pearson, p. 2.

[25] Johnson and Pearson, p. 133.

[26] Johnson and Pearson, p. 116; and Clarke, p. 52.

[27] Evelyn Marcussen Hatch, Psycholinguistics: A Second Language Perspective (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House, 1983), p. 74.